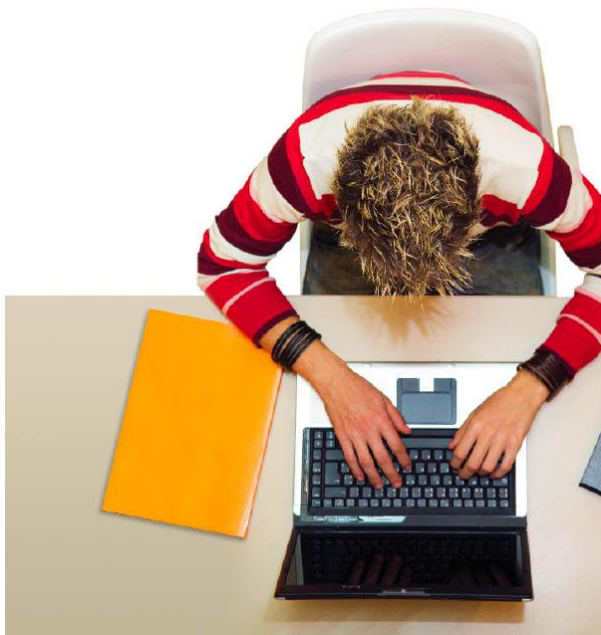


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COVER STORY

# Public Libraries Daring to Be Different

by Molly Donelan and Liz Miller



The state of the economy has left local governments agonizing over budget reductions in virtually every service area. Budget discussions frequently focus on core versus discretionary services. Public libraries are often among the services labeled as discretionary despite their benefits to quality of life, literacy, and access to technology.

Last year, 169 million people in the United States visited a public library to find work, apply for college, secure government benefits, learn about critical medical treatments, and connect with their communities. Yet across the country, library operating budgets are being cut because they are rarely associated with public safety or health.

New research is finding that libraries are making significant contributions beyond their traditional roles. Local governments, forced to do more with less, have discovered that public libraries are an untapped resource and can assist in both the economic recovery and other strategic initiatives.

Is your local government getting a good return on investment by using its library strategically? Regardless of governance structures, reporting roles, or funding sources, public libraries can be valuable partners in addressing community needs. Your library system can actively contribute to larger community goals in education, public safety, economic development, and the environment.

In 2007, ICMA partnered with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to explore how local governments can use their public libraries in more innovative ways. “Our partnership with ICMA has highlighted the many ways public libraries can help solve critical issues that communities and their residents face, and improve quality of life for all people,” said Jill Nishi, deputy director of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s U.S. Libraries program. “We challenge city and county managers to be champions of public libraries.”

Here are the stories of nine jurisdictions that engaged their libraries in creative solutions to community challenges involving public safety, emergency management, the environment, economic development, early childhood literacy, teen services, and cultural engagement.

## **FAYETTEVILLE, ARKANSAS: SOLAR TEST BED PROJECT**

**Population: 72,208**

**Library Budget: \$3,790,929**

In June 2010, Fayetteville Public Library’s Solar Test Bed Project installed 60 solar panels on the library roof, testing new technology in an effort to support emerging local business. The solar energy system is generating electricity and reducing the library’s carbon footprint. A kiosk in the library displays real-time energy production data and provides educational information on solar power.

The solar array will initially provide power to the library using a commercially available inverter. After six months of collecting production data, the library will test a highly efficient state-of-the-art silicon carbide inverter developed by Arkansas Power Electronics International.

In partnership with the city sustainability coordinator, the University of Arkansas, Arkansas Energy Office, American Electric Power, BP Solar, and other partners, the Solar Test Bed Project will facilitate local economic development and demonstrate the region’s commitment to sustainability. “The Fayetteville Public Library and the University of Arkansas are out in front in the field of sustainability, and this is a great example of that leadership,” says John Coleman, Fayetteville’s sustainability coordinator.

## **FAIRFAX COUNTY, VIRGINIA: CHANGING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE**

**Population: 1,041,507**

**Library Budget: \$26,035,911**

Fairfax County is one of the nation’s safest large jurisdictions. In 2005, however, it experienced an alarming rise in recidivism and gang involvement, particularly among teenage girls. Court and probation officers identified anger and alienation as the chief characteristics of repeat offenders. This led the library to pilot Changing Lives Through Literature, an alternative sentencing program, in collaboration with the Fairfax County juvenile and domestic relations court services and the Virginia department of corrections.

Guided by a facilitator and joined by a court officer, groups of 10 to 15 teen offenders read and discuss novels, short stories, and poems that illustrate themes including friendship, values, choices, and consequences. The program, held at the public library, lasts 10 weeks. One participant commented, “I learned to listen to other people’s perspectives. I didn’t ever realize people can look at the same situation and have different opinions about it.”

Within one year of completing the program, 90 percent of the 107 juveniles who participated had no new charges. By comparison, in FY 2008, only 72 percent of juveniles

who were placed on probation avoided arrest. Each 10-week session costs roughly \$330 per participant, while 10 weeks in jail cost nearly \$5,000.

## MIAMI, OKLAHOMA: MIAMI NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND EMPOWERMENT CENTER

**Population: 13,364**

**Library Budget: \$339,741**

Miami is the center of government for nine Native American tribes—more than any other county in the nation. For many tribes, increasing assimilation has resulted in loss of history, culture, and language. To honor the heritage of their area and facilitate cross-cultural understanding, the city and the Miami Public Library partnered to provide services to this diverse community. Use of technology centered in the library, from computer literacy classes to workshops about federal and state websites for tribal staff, has been a key component of the partnership.

Meetings between city and library officials and tribal leaders have resulted in program planning and, more importantly, trust and relationship building. Cooperative ventures have developed particularly around the critical need to preserve and revitalize native languages. Production of language-related DVDs, training opportunities for area teachers, and programs about native languages for the general public are being planned through these collaborations.

A deeper appreciation for Native American culture has resulted from this work. Miami Library Director Marcia Johnson states that “I have learned the importance of consensus and harmony for the native people in my area, in contrast to competition and rank.”

### Does your library director have these skills?

- **Participates.** Library leaders belong “at the table” with other local government decisionmakers, involved in overall planning for community betterment and service provision.
- **Shares your mission.** Libraries and other service providers should know and share the strategic mission of your local government. They should find areas of commonality and ways to share resources and efforts with other departments.
- **Builds partnerships.** Partnerships with public agencies, nonprofits, and the private sector strengthen programs. Effective partnerships require time and effort to establish, but they are worth the effort if they support the vision of the community.
- **Appreciates diversity.** Differing cultural norms (organizational and community norms, for example) should be recognized, understood, and respected; and adjustments should be made as needed in program planning and execution. Flexibility and adaptability are key characteristics, needed by all involved in joint ventures.
- **Communicates.** Communicating with partners, stakeholders, and the larger community is important to grow and nurture partnerships.
- **Fosters champions.** Champions and advocates are important to make programs successful and sustainable. Library champions have a clear understanding of library services and the role the library plays in the quality of life of a community. They can contribute support in any number of ways, including time, funds, influence, services, goods, and related items.
- **Embraces innovation.** Reinforcing the library’s transformational nature and having it viewed as a great place to help change people’s lives is critical during tough budget times and when local government must be constantly changing how it does business. The library should be an engine for innovation in a community.

## **GEORGETOWN COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA: HURRICANE PROJECT**

**Population: 60,860**

**Library Budget: \$1,092,355**

In Georgetown County, the library has taken an active role in preparing the public to survive and recover from inevitable coastal hurricanes. Twenty years after Hurricane Hugo devastated this South Carolina seaside community, the library teamed up with county and state emergency management personnel to offer traditional public lectures and workshops, as well as disaster game simulations, Web 2.0 communication techniques, oral-history video interviews, digital storytelling, and the creation of a digital collection of historic hurricane photographs. The library involved the entire community in the project, from kids starring in hurricane safety public service announcements to nursing home residents recounting how they survived Hurricane Hazel in 1954.

During hurricane season, the project ran 10 public service announcements on local channels, reminding everyone how to protect themselves during and after a hurricane. The library also provided Web 2.0 training to eight county departments to ensure that residents received prompt and reliable updates in the event of an emergency. Johnny Morant, chairman of the Georgetown County Council, says "The county government sees the library as part of the emergency management system because we know how important it is to get information out, and the library system is there, spread out through the community, and people utilize it."

## **PENDLETON, OREGON: WIRED FOR SAFETY**

**Population: 17,300**

**Library Budget: \$688,000**

Both the library director and the police chief in Pendleton understand the opportunities and pitfalls of working with teens. They encounter teens seeking engagement as well as teens disconnected from the community, a detachment that manifests in substance abuse, truancy, and gangs. When juvenile crime increased by 48 percent between 2005 and 2008, the library and police department formed an innovative partnership, Wired for Safety, that focused on their shared mission to create a safe and productive environment for teens and the community.

Using a mix of technology (a citywide wireless network and surveillance equipment) and expanded services (programs for teens and community safety, including self defense, identity theft protection, and Internet safety), Pendleton partnered the strength and security of local law enforcement with the empowering culture of the public library to make the library a comfortable and welcoming community space.

"Libraries are an invaluable resource to any community," says Police Chief Stuart Roberts. "The police department was looking for a vehicle to provide public information and education in a nonthreatening environment conducive to learning . . . what better place than the library?"

## **ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY REGIONAL LIBRARY/BUENA VISTA, VIRGINIA: TRAINING AND CALL CENTER**

**Population: 6,361**

**Library Budget: \$1,386,733**

Buena Vista and the surrounding area have suffered from the economic decline and loss of traditional manufacturing jobs. In response to this community priority, the Rockbridge Regional Library opened a computer and call training center to provide free basic training on personal computers, individualized assistance for PC users, and advanced training in the skills needed to become an effective, incoming call-center representative.

“The goal of training is to take people from knowing nothing about information technology to making them information literate and providing them with skills to enhance their lives,” says Library Director Alan Bobowski. “We also hope to create good-paying jobs to lower unemployment and underemployment in the region.”

Buena Vista is actively marketing the call center to corporations seeking cost-effective call-center services staffed by pretrained individuals. The center will provide jobs for the unemployed and underemployed in the Buena Vista-Lexington-Rockbridge County region. The supply of trained employees will also encourage businesses to establish their own permanent call-center operations in the area.

### **DALLAS, TEXAS: EVERY CHILD READY TO READ @ DALLAS**

**Population: 1,192,538**

**Library Budget: \$17,000,000**

With the seventh-highest dropout rate in the country and more than 50 percent of students failing basic skills assessments, Dallas chose a long-term approach to prepare the city’s young children for future success. The Dallas public library’s Every Child Ready to Read @ Dallas (ECRR) provides parents and caregivers with instruction on child development and preliteracy skills beginning in infancy. Library staff coordinates partnerships from the private sector, community organizations, and elected officials.

Information is available in multiple languages and delivered in innovative ways in libraries and other community locations. To date, the program has reached more than 6,000 parents and caregivers and has impacted the lives of 40,000 children. Dallas City Manager Mary Suhm considers the library a critical part of every city’s structure and says of ECRR, “This is the most fundamental way to improve the workforce in the city of Dallas. It is long term, and it is long lasting.”

### **IOWA CITY, IOWA: ECO IOWA CITY**

**Population: 62,649**

**Library Budget: \$5,363,000**

After suffering a devastating tornado in 2006 and historic flooding in 2008, Iowa City was looking to rebuild greener, with a focus on environmental stewardship. In response, the Iowa City public library partnered with the public works department and others to develop ECO Iowa City, an educational program providing residents with demonstration projects and up-to-date information on sustainability, particularly stormwater management, local foods and compost, smart waste disposal, and energy efficiency.

ECO Iowa City developed partnerships with other city departments, community groups, local businesses, and city councilmembers. The library brought to the partnership valuable physical space, its respected reputation across the region, and 745,000 yearly visitors. Within six months, ECO Iowa City boasted 30 partner organizations and had delivered educational content and other resources to more than 6,000 residents.

ECO Iowa City has also distributed composting equipment, rain barrels, and weatherizing materials; collected electronics and prescription drugs; and conducted educational programming on recycling and creating a rain garden.

“Public works did not always know what the library had to offer, but as a result of this partnership we have a stronger outreach and education program,” says Rick Fosse, acting assistant city manager and director of public works.

## **SANTA ANA, CALIFORNIA: CONNECT!/CONECTATE!: CONNECTING YOURSELF WITH YOUR FUTURE—CONECTATE CON TU FUTURO**

**Population: 355,662**

**Library Budget: \$3,293,388**

Santa Ana, a densely populated city with a median age of 28.1, is facing poverty, unemployment, and low educational attainment. City and library leaders set their sights on providing young people with the basic tools needed to help them advance academically and economically.

“Connect!/Conectate!: Connecting Yourself with Your Future—Conectate Con Tu Futuro” grew from the success of the teen library club, a program in which city youth contributed more than 3,000 hours of community service. This resulted in 100 percent of teen club members graduating from high school and 90 percent going on to higher education despite the city’s discouraging educational success statistics.

The program provided teens with opportunities to assist adults who have limited English proficiency as well as develop language and computing skills. Young adults are also able to work with children ages 5 to 11 on math and literacy skills.

Santa Ana’s library was recently integrated into the recreation, parks, and community services department. “There is now a greater recognition of what the library can do in youth services,” says Santa Ana City Manager Dave Ream. “It is a core service and a good value for the cost.”

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